



# **Florida Farmers, Inc.**

P.O. Box 540623 • Lake Worth, FL 33454-0623  
(954) 772-1771 • Fax (954) 772-1679  
[www.floridafarmers.org](http://www.floridafarmers.org)

## **USDA Listening Meeting**

**Orlando, Florida**

**May 14, 2003**

**Good afternoon. Welcome to Florida where fresh fruits and vegetables are grown and provided to consumers in every state of the union.**

**Florida Farmers, Inc. is an advocacy group representing the interests of Florida vegetable farmers. Many of us have been working together since the 1970's to seek fairness in government actions and policy and do what we can to survive as a significant part of America's farm economy.**

**It has not been easy. Winter vegetables - tomatoes, peppers, squash, cucumbers and eggplant - are grown in a few other states, but essentially we are talking about a Florida industry that provides fresh fruits and vegetables to the 50 states and Canada.**

**The central issue is fair national trade policy for agriculture and it is both a complex legal and economic subject and a subject of hardball politics. Farmers from Florida on these issues will simply not survive without a broad base of public and political support. And we have found that we cannot build that support by only talking with other farmers and suppliers.**

**The consumer is the key player.**

The threat to survival from current U.S. trade policies – symbolized by NAFTA – is a real threat. And it has caused Florida farmers to look more closely at issues close to the farm, issues that need attention such as farm worker housing, health, and immigration reform. And also issues relating to stewardship of the land and protection of the environment.

Both in Florida and Washington we continue to play a positive leadership role. It is the right thing to do, but probably more important is the fact that it helps in the fight for survival. Enlightened self-interest is a proven strategy. And a unified base of all segments of agriculture is always a stronger political position.

But the centerpiece of the strategy that resulted in passage of the Country of Origin Labeling law in the 2002 Farm Bill is the coalition of farmers and American consumers. There is simply no way that Florida winter vegetable farmers have a chance in hell of surviving unless more than one state cares about what happens. Even if the President's brother happens to be the governor of that one state.

There is a major battle raging within American agriculture about country of origin labeling. And there is big money on the line. USDA is here today to listen to viewpoints on the subject, seeking to learn how the present law will be successfully implemented.

Florida Farmers, Inc. offers the following advice: listen to the American consumer.

If we had listened primarily to the industry 25 years ago when the late Johnnie Goodnight and I were seeking a Florida labeling law, Florida would never have passed the law. And there probably would be no national country of origin labeling law to discuss today.

For segments of the industry it is a fight over money and markets. For

consumers it is simply the right to know what you are purchasing and where your food comes from. All of us are consumers and all of us seek quality and value in the food we purchase and eat.

Florida Farmers, Inc. is truly proud of the leadership that our Commissioner of Agriculture, Charles Bronson, continues to provide on the labeling issue. We are equally proud of Governor Jeb Bush for supporting COOL for fruits and vegetables since 1995. We fully support the workable solution for implementation set forth in the draft proposed rules for country of origin labeling, as proposed by Commissioner Bronson. The key is the tripartite approach, building on existing, successful practices within three very distinct industries – vegetables, meat and fish. It is a common sense approach and we urge you to follow it.

You will not hear any high cost figures from Florida winter vegetable farmers or from our most important allies, the consumers of America. Those high figures are nothing but bully scare tactics of the retail industry.

Let me close by quoting from an editorial that appeared in June of 1980 in the Palm Beach Post when Florida's new labeling law had just been enacted. Newspapers sometimes get it right; we suggest that this time they did. In 25 years the basic issues are still the same:

“Florida vegetable farmers won a morale-boosting victory with passage of a bill putting teeth into the law requiring produce sold in the state to be labeled to show its origin.

“Consumers no doubt will find origin labeling enlightening and not just because they may want to help local farmers by buying Florida produce, or to avoid the residue of pesticides illegal in this country but commonly used in Mexico and other countries.

**“Labeling is a means for consumers to compare the published wholesale prices with retail prices paid at the grocery to see if they get the full benefit of plunging wholesale prices during the months when foreign growers begin dumping their produce on the U.S. market.”**

**There is no reason why consumers should be denied their right to know where their food is grown. Ask anyone. The answer is always the same. All of us want to know what we are eating.**

**J. Luis Rodriguez  
Florida Farmers, Inc.**